



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

What is a Problem?

Adolphsen, Jes

Publication date:
2007

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Adolphsen, J. (2007). What is a Problem?.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

What is a problem ?

Problems can be said to be anomalies (as Uffe Juul Jensen do). Something can be called an anomaly, if it is departing from how it usually behaves.

A practical problem or a practical anomaly is a problem in relation to our practice: Something in our surroundings - or in our selves, do not act as expected or wished for or we had adjusted our actions and practice after. The criterion for that we have a **practical** problem is, that even though the problem is known, it can be solved by accident or it can disappear as a problem, without us knowing why it disappears or is solved. We can call a problem a practical problem, if knowledge or insight is not a necessary condition for that the problem is solved.

It can for example be a practical problem that I lack money for my rent. The problem can be solved accidentally, I can win in the lottery or get unexpected money back from the tax authorities. The problem can also disappear. I can move out of the apartment which anyway is much too expensive or the rent can be lowered unknown why to me or - God forbid - maybe I can learn to be fond of porridge made with water and no cigarettes, so it is after all possible to get the money to the rent.

Colds and other diseases are also practical problems. Do the disease disappear, is the problem solved. One can also imagine people are getting used to have a cold or even getting fond of having a cold. If that is the case, it would not be a practical problem any longer. The practical problem can disappear without me or anybody else knowing **why** it has disappeared.

Unemployment is a practical political problem in Denmark of today. If by chance there tomorrow is full employment, the practical political problem would be solved or if started to understand work as a menace **unemployment** would not be the problem. Practical problems do not need a conscious process of acquiring knowledge in order to be solved.

But if I want to know **why** I do can pay my rent I in spite of a cheap apartment and full time work, and if I want to know **why** some people catches colds, and do I want **why** there is unemployment, these practical problems become **theoretical** problems. It is all about to acquire knowledge of the hidden mechanisms, which makes things happen, and you are not getting that knowledge by that the practical problems disappear. The theoretical problem is not solved just because the corresponding practical problem is solved. If the practical problem is solved without being solved deliberately or consciously solved, one could maintain that a new theoretical problem has arisen, namely **why** was the practical problem solved?

Theoretical problems - which is the object for basic science (in contrast to applied science, which has practical problems as object) - can be said **anomalies in relation to our knowledge or our theories about the world**. A theoretical problem is an

anomaly in relation to our experiences or understanding about the world so far. A problem in relation to our earlier understandings, explanations or knowledge of the world. And it does not matter how we have acquired that knowledge, whether we have gotten that knowledge from intercourse with the world or from earlier conscious activities of getting knowledge.

Theoretical problems do often come out of the discrepancies, which directly confronts us in form of practical problems.

To each practical problem, there is a theoretical problem, namely the theoretical problem “why is the practical problem there?”

The solution to a theoretical problem, the answer to the why-question, will provide us with the insight, which makes it possible for us consciously and aimed to solve the practical problem. Do I know precisely why I do not have money for the rent or why I have a cold, or why there is unemployment, do I also know what I have to do in order to solve the practical problem or understand why it can not be solved or what I have to do in order to avoid the problem arises.

So even though there is an intimate and important connection between practical and theoretical problems, it is not all theoretical problems which spring out of practical problems or those discrepancies which confronts us. So even though there to each practical problem corresponds a theoretical problem. There are theoretical problems where there are no corresponding practical problems.

For example one can begin by question and wonder about things which one has considered “natural”. It is not an anomaly in relation to my practice, that trees grow upward. But someday I can raise the theoretical problem: “Why do trees actually grow upward?” It is only a theoretical problem so far as it is an anomaly in relation to our theories. But it is odd, that something, the trees, in this fashion is defying the law of gravity.

It is not in opposition to my earlier experiences or my understanding of the world, that women get less in salary than men for the same work. But some day I can start to wonder and raise the theoretical problem: “Why?” It is - after all – an anomaly in relation to our general understanding that your salary is depending on your work.

Theoretical problems can also come from scientific theories. If a theory is set up to explain a certain phenomenon, can that theory occasion that other phenomena or conditions becomes anomalies in relation to that theory.

Theoretical problems can be brought about partly by practical problems, partly by normal imaginative wondering and partly by advanced theories. All theoretical problems have that in common that they stems from our lifeworld. They stems from

natural background and from our socioeconomic, cultural and material conditions for our life. It is so because our conditions for life limits us and these conditions for life often entails that there is unintended inopportune consequences of our actions. Discrepancies in our lifeworld make it at all meaningful to engage in theoretical problems.

Theoretical problems also stems also from our lifeworld in that way that our natural background and our conditions for life determines which theoretical problems we at all can see and confront our selves with. Theoretical problems about money rent, about tempo in development, about simultaneousness can not be posed if it is not possible to measure time, as well these theoretical problems can not be posed in a culture where time is considered without end the same as eternity and cyclic returning.

Theoretical problems do not have directly to come from practical problems, but theoretical problems as a category would be meaningless without practical problems as a category.

Practical problems are problems, contradictions, for somebody. Someone has the practical problem. One can have a practical problem, without knowing it.

Practical problems have the same ontological status as actions.

A bird building a nest, is not making an action, it just making movement, because it do not having the concept of "building nest". We have the concept of "building nest", and it is us who conceive of the bird as building a nest, as making an action. A little paradoxical, one can say with Justus Hartnack, that the bird is only building a nest because we have the concept of "building a nest". Actions are categorization of movements.

In the same way are practical problems a categorization. It is a categorization **somebody** is making of someone's (one own or others) movements or occurrences. If something is categorized as a practical problem it is categorized as a contradiction between what one **wants** and what one **can**.

A bird which is unable to get a twig in place can be said to have a practical problem, because **we** have the concept of a practical problem. We are categorizing the birds movements as it is having a practical problem. As any categorization it is made for a purpose. There must be a criterion or a principle for the categorization. When we are saying that the bird has a practical problem, it is because we understand it as the is a contradiction between what the bird want and what the bird can. The principle for the categorization of something as a practical problem is that some body will or want something and cannot obtain it. So we can only say that the bird has a practical problem on the background that we can and will say that the bird will or wants the have the twig in place.

In order to call something a practical problem it is not necessary that those who has it is conscious of it. It only call for that those who ascribe a practical problem to

someone also ascribe that that someone also has will and wants and note that there is contradiction between this intention and the possibility of carrying it out.

Theoretical problems have an other ontological status. There is always someone who have a theoretical problem, but that someone must **know** that he or she has it. **A theoretical problem is an ignorance one knows of.** Theoretical problems have the same ontological status as **knowledge**.

Knowledge is a condition or a disposition. One do not have to put ones knowledge into words or into actions, just as one do not have try to solve a theoretical problem one has.

Theoretical problems is solved by theories, but one do have to try to get these theories, either by trying to find out whether others have provided a theory which solves the theoretical problem or to find a theory that solves the problem yourself.

If you are trying to solve a theoretical problem you have, you are involved in a conscious process of acquiring knowledge. If you are trying yourself solve a theoretical problem – one can say - if it at all is important to identify the word – you are involved in doing science or doing research.

